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ABSTRACT

This study examined how three elementary teachers who acted as lead teachers in public schools in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia perceived themselves as contributors to building a professional culture in schools. The participants, two women and one man, were experienced teachers in elementary schools and were Master's degree candidates in a curriculum and instruction program that emphasized teacher leadership through curriculum writing, teacher-led staff development, and action research. Qualitative data for cross-case analysis were drawn from individual interviews concerning their professional histories and their beliefs about teaching and change, and their views of themselves as leaders among peers. Data collection also involved the teachers' reflective journals, classroom observations, culminating projects from graduate studies, and a group debriefing session. Interviews with the participants' respective building principals were also included in the data analysis. Results suggested that lead teachers: (1) identify strongly with the role of teacher; (2) believe that change improves one's knowledge and teaching practice; (3) understand the connections between curriculum and assessment for increasing student achievement; and (4) gain convincing evidence for change by participating in action research. These teachers were able to make connections between theory and practice that set them apart from other teachers. (Contains 16 references). (Author/SM)

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ED 412 214

Lead Teachers in Hampton Roads: Three Case Studies

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Abstract

This study examined and described how three experienced teachers who serve as lead teachers in public schools in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia perceive themselves as contributors to building a professional culture in schools. The participants held 11 to 17 years' teaching experience in elementary schools. Qualitative data for cross-case analysis were drawn from individual interviews concerning the participants' professional histories and beliefs about teaching and change, reflective journals, classroom observations, culminating projects from graduate studies, and a group debriefing session. Interviews with the participants' respective building principals were also included in the data analyses. Results suggested that lead teachers (1) identify strongly with the role of teacher; (2) believe that change improves one's knowledge and teaching practice; (3) understand the connections between curriculum and assessment for increasing student achievement; and (4) gain convincing evidence for change by participating in action research. Context variables and personal factors that enable teacher leadership are also discussed.

Lead Teachers in Hampton Roads: Three Case Studies

This study, sponsored by a Research Grant Award in 1996 from the Virginia Educational Research Association (VERA), examined and described how some experienced teachers who serve as lead teachers in public schools in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia perceive themselves as contributors to building a professional culture in schools (Lieberman, 1988). Like the majority of today's teaching force (white, age 40, married with 2 children) these teachers have been educated and prepared for their profession through conventional paradigms about teaching and learning.

Recently, however, these teachers have found themselves in new roles in response to the expectations of a converging series of modern ideas for school reform (see, e.g., Fullan, 1982; Goodlad, 1984, 1990; Sarason, 1971). Although they may not desire to serve schools as administrators in the typical sense, they have assumed leadership roles "close to the classroom" (Little,1988, p. 88). These "quasi-administrative" roles include curriculum developer, grade level coordinator, and resource teacher. These "lead teachers," as they are sometimes called, are important liaisons between the classroom and the reform work of individual schools and school districts. Besides working as classroom teachers, they also write new curriculum, conduct staff development to train other teachers in the new curriculum, and conduct action research for continuous improvement of the new curriculum (Miller, 1988).

In sum, lead teachers can represent an influential group of experienced practitioners who are positioned to effect change not only in classrooms but also in the professional culture of their school buildings and, perhaps, even in their school districts. Because many school districts in the past decade have made a shift toward decentralizing central administration and increasing site-based management of

schools, the role of the lead teacher has become an important part of effecting change both inside and outside classrooms.

In Virginia and other states, lead teacher positions have been created to assist teachers and other practitioners in order to implement current changes in classrooms. These changes include, among others, the use of computers in teaching, math and science instructional strategies, and the inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular classroom.

Conditions and demands outside schools, however, have affected the extent to which changes inside classrooms can be realized. In the Hampton Roads area, which includes the cities of Newport News, Norfolk, and Virginia Beach, there have been shifts in resources and school spending due to industrial and military downsizing. Other conditions, such as transient school populations and new state standards for curriculum and assessment, have compounded the problem of change.

By examining and describing (1) the personal and professional backgrounds of some lead teachers, (2) what they believe about teaching and change, and (3) how they view themselves as leaders among peers, some light may be shed on how to build better connections between university-based continuing teacher education, professional development in schools, and teacher professionalism.

Theoretical Perspective

Zeichner (1983) and Goodman (1986) both demonstrated that some teachers hold beliefs which enable them to make substantive decisions for altering traditional classroom practice. These "proactive" teachers are disposed to influence changes in education, especially if they employ reflective practices and receive appropriate professional support for their efforts. These teachers tend to participate more fully in the professional aspects of teaching, such as developing support systems among other progressive individuals within the greater school community and writing

proposals for curriculum change, to mention a few.

Miller (1988) discussed a three-fold process in which lead teachers participated in (1) curriculum writing, (2) teacher-led staff development, and (3) action research. These experiences enabled classroom teachers to become "major decision makers in the educational process as well as implementers for programs" (p. 172). Thus, a professional culture in schools is one that ensures teacher competence through more rigorous preparation, certification, and selection, while at the same time enabling teacher decision making concerning what is to be taught, when, and how (Darling-Hammond, 1988).

In particular, action research has been cited "as a way of meeting the investigative needs of the educational community" (Oja & Smulyan, 1989, p.1). Discussions by teachers about action research "can provide the kind of environment which will encourage adult development in schools. These discussions frequently draw on teachers' deeply held values about students, teaching, and curriculum and have a moral/ethical dimension which encourages teachers to think in more encompassing ways" (p. 141).

Method

The three participants in this study (two females and one male) were career professional teachers (Holmes, 1986) with 11 to 17 years' teaching experience in elementary schools in the Hampton Roads area of southeastern Virginia. At the time of the study in 1996-97, they were M.A. degree candidates in a curriculum and instruction program in which the investigator served as their academic advisor. The program emphasized teacher leadership through curriculum writing, teacher-led staff development, and action research.

The participants were chosen for the study from an intact group of 24 graduate students because they (1) exhibited analytical and reflective thinking in their graduate

course work; (2) expressed a high level of interest and enthusiasm for participation in action research; (3) were near completion of their graduate studies; and (4) were involved in lead teacher activities, such as writing and implementing new curriculum, serving as a resource teacher, and piloting an early childhood program in a magnet school.

Qualitative data for cross-case analysis were drawn from individual interviews concerning the participants' professional histories and beliefs about teaching and change, reflective journals, classroom observations, culminating projects from their graduate studies, and a group debriefing session. At the group debriefing session, the participants recommended a list of questions to be used by the investigator for interviews with their school building principals.

Individual interviews with the participants, conducted in Summer 1996, were audio-taped and transcribed. Data from the interviews and other sources, described above, were analyzed by means of a file-folder method (Merriam, 1988) to create categories for the cross-case analysis. Member checks and peer debriefers were used to ensure triangulation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Mark, Grace, and Joan (not their real names) were experienced elementary teachers who taught in the Hampton Roads area. Each taught in a different school district. All three were classmates in a cohort of graduate students working toward an M.A. degree in curriculum and instruction at an off-campus location of a large university.

Mark: The Problem-Solver. Mark, age 38, had been teaching for 17 years. Raised and educated in the Northeast, his original ambition was to attend a music college and become a professional jazz guitarist. He realized, however, that finding work as a professional guitarist was very competitive. Instead, he attended a liberal

arts college where he majored in English. He thought he would pursue certification in secondary education, but changed his mind when he did an early field observation at a local high school. He felt that he did not have "rapport" with that age group. A summer experience as a camp counselor for mentally retarded children enticed him to think about certification in special education, but that would require additional time in college. Finally, he switched to elementary education, where he felt he had a natural rapport with the children, especially those in grades 2 through 5. Mark moved to Virginia to take his first teaching position in a rural part of the state. After that, he moved to the Hampton Roads area where he and his wife, also an elementary teacher, settled down to raise their two sons.

Mark's interviews, graduate projects, and teaching practice focused on the complexities of problem-solving. Concerning the complexities of his personal life, he wrote:

> First of all, we will never be rich. Neither of us went into teaching expecting a life of luxury. We accept our financial situation, but there are many moments when we wish we could do more for ourselves, each other, or our children. Another problem is that we experience our greatest stress at the same time as each other: September, December, June. This makes it difficult for one of us to pick up the slack for the other. We do it, but it is often a sacrifice that we can barely afford to make. Also, when you are married to a teacher, it is hard to escape the topic of education. Teaching is not just what we do, but who we are.

For 13 years, Mark taught third grade in an elementary school in a small district that serves a predominantly white, upper class population. Although he had worked steadily in the same building, he took on new teaching challenges every three to five years to keep himself from becoming "too comfortable" in his job. These included serving as an enrichment resource teacher, working with about 100 students across

grade level; writing new curriculum; teaching summer school every year; and serving on various committees, including the school improvement team. Recently, he had considered entering law school. Reflecting upon the prospects of having to reinvent himself as a lawyer, however, forced him to forego the idea. Instead, he entered a graduate program in curriculum and instruction, with an eye toward teaching at the college level some time in the future.

Grace: The Communicator. Grace was 47 years old, married, and the mother of two grown sons. Born and raised in the Hampton Roads area, she earned her B.A. degree at a local university. Like Mark, she, too, loved literature and thought she would teach high school. Her student teaching experience in secondary education, however, convinced her that she was not prepared to deal with the "overwhelming social problems" and large numbers of students required of high school teachers.

After graduation, she worked as an editor until she had her two sons. It was her son's experience in Kindergarten that attracted her to reenter teaching as an elementary teacher. She returned to college at night to take certification courses, while at the same time teaching in the Catholic school her son attended. Her early years of teaching included collaborative teaching, involvement in school-community activities, and substituting in a variety of grades in public schools. At the time of this study, she had been teaching second grade for ten years in a large school district that serves an ethnically and economically diverse population.

In her interviews, graduate work, and teaching practice, Grace often communicated her meaning through stories and vignettes. Her identification as both a teacher and learner is communicated in the following story about her learning how to ski:

> And [the ski instructor] was a wonderful, patient man. He was supposed to be like the best ski instructor there. And at the end, you know, I didn't know how to

ski. And he says, I am really sorry. I feel that your husband's going to be real upset when he finds out how much money he's wasted. He said, but I really feel like your main problem is that you're afraid of the mountain. You're afraid of heights and until you conquer your fear of this mountain, you're never going to be able to ski.

And I told him, don't ever be afraid that you've wasted my husband's money. You have taught me the most valuable lesson because now I know how my children feel when I try a million different ways to get them to learn something and they just don't understand what I am talking about and they just don't get it...You taught me that I have to remember [this for] my students.

As a result of her taking graduate courses in curriculum and instruction, Grace was asked by her school district to serve on a district-wide curriculum renewal project. This activity put her in touch with other teachers across the district and led to her co-teaching a graduate course sponsored by the district. Her responsibilities as Grade 2 team leader helped connect her with specialists in her building and with social service workers from the neighboring housing projects where many of her students lived. Although she did not foresee herself going on to earn a doctorate, she wanted to continue working as a mentor with beginning and experienced teachers.

Joan: The Connector. At the beginning of her interview, Joan (age 33) said she had "always been critical" of her teachers. Taking her father's advice to "do something about it," she attended a Virginia college and became certified for both lower- and upper-elementary education. Early in her teacher preparation, she was impressed by the connections she observed between theory and practice. The principal of the building where she did her student teaching, for example, also served as her methods instructor. After graduation, she spent some time working in preschools in rural West Virginia. That experience, she claimed, helped her step away from concerns about

content and focus more on classroom management, a set of skills she would later connect to a Constructivist teaching approach.

Joan returned to her hometown in Hampton Roads, where she settled down with her husband and two young children. Her parents lived nearby and helped provide the extra family support she needed to balance her roles as parent, wife, teacher, and graduate student. In her autobiography she wrote:

> A year and a half ago, I was agonizing over the choice that I made to continue my education and further my career. My children are now five and seven years old and they are becoming independent as they begin endeavors of their own. [My daughter] is in second grade and attends [the school] where I am teaching...I love having her close to me. We drive in to school each morning and this gives us good quality time to discuss school, her activities, and other special things. Once we are at school, I rarely see her, but we take comfort in knowing that we will catch a glimpse of each other at some time in the day. She rides the bus to Grandma's house each afternoon. [My son] is in a four year old preschool program...He is also with my parents the rest of the day. My husband is still working at [his] firm. He enjoys his job and growing responsibilities. We are partners in all ways when it comes to being a family...This is something that has not changed. If anything, their support is stronger as they see me grow personally and professionally.

Two years' ago, Joan took a Kindergarten teaching position in a new magnet school where all the faculty were interviewed and selected by the principal. In a short time, the school gained a reputation for success in the school district, drawing its population of teachers and students from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Joan was proud of her school because she "quickly got to see and participate in what...the teaching profession could be."

Guided by a principal who had "a shared vision of teachers as leaders and decision makers," Joan's school was a place where teachers were motivated to be experimental and collaborative in their approach to teaching. Their work was supported by the newest in teaching technologies, high parental involvement, and community interest. In addition, a district-wide initiative to implement a new teacher assessment connected to student achievement goals gave Joan an opportunity to work as a trainer with other teachers across the district. Joan also served on committees, including school improvement, technology, and the district reading council.

At the end of her graduate program, Joan was instrumental in making connections between her school and university to help establish a professional development site. She envisioned herself in the future as having earned a doctorate and finding ways to connect preservice and inservice teacher education.

Beliefs about Teaching and Change

Identification as a Teacher. All of the participants expressed a strong identification with the role of teacher. They viewed themselves as career professional teachers. That is, experienced teachers who have advanced understandings of curriculum and instruction, are child advocates, and are capable of instructing other teachers (Holmes, 1986). Even their future plans were related to teachers and teaching. They did not consider entering school administration as a way of advancing their careers. Mark, for example, reported that some people "expected" him to move into administration because he was a male.

All the participants actively sought to promote change in their schools through a balanced sense of caring and justice. In a final group interview, they agreed they did not consider themselves to be especially nurturant in their teaching, even though they worked with young children. "We're not mommies," one of them said, jokingly.

Instead, their efforts to change their teaching practice or change conditions for students and teachers were prompted by concerns about fairness and equity.

Change Improves Knowledge and Practice. The participants reported a dynamic tension between teaching and change that resulted in an improvement in their professional knowledge and practice. Making periodic transitions to new teaching situations forced them to gain new information and learn new skills. For Grace and Joan, establishing a level of comfort for themselves and their students while they implemented changes in the classroom was important. For Mark, on the other hand, his becoming too comfortable was a warning sign to actively seek change.

The Power of Curriculum and Assessment. As might be expected, their experiences in a graduate program that emphasized teacher leadership had affirmed the participants' thinking in some areas and challenged their abilities in others. Their preservice interest in seeing the connections between theory and practice was rekindled. This new understanding of theory and practice far exceeded that which "make and take" types of professional development had provided them in the past. In Grace's words, advanced teacher education was "substance, not fluff."

Gaining new knowledge about curriculum alignment and new skills for designing interdisciplinary curriculum expanded their abilities for writing curriculum. Gaining new knowledge about classroom assessment and new skills for developing teaching strategies that reach student achievement targets proved to be the most difficult yet significant learning experience for improving their teaching practice. In short, they believed these skills set them apart even from their peers who were considered excellent practitioners.

Convincing Evidence for Change. Mark, Grace, and Joan found that their action research projects had helped them raise "big questions" that guided their work in and outside their classrooms. Their projects enabled them to focus on what mattered most

to them: for Mark, problem-solving in math; for Grace, better communication with disadvantaged children and their families; for Joan, looking for connections between Constructivist theory and young children's learning.

Although they clearly understood the limitations of their research, important truths about their teaching practice were made visible to them. In Mark's project, for example, he and his co-teacher took time to conduct group interviews with their third graders about why problem-solving was so hard for them. Mark wrote:

> When we met to share the students' responses we were surprised to discover they all stated one particular reason, one we had not anticipated. They all expressed a concern about distractions...making it hard for them to concentrate. This convinced us to develop a new discipline system. It made an immediate and dramatic difference in the atmosphere of the classroom...I do not believe we would ever have made this change had we not talked directly to our students. I learned that every so often, you have to stop talking and start listening.

When Grace embarked on her action research project, she wanted to implement a remedial reading intervention for two children who were at-risk of being retained in second grade. Although the intervention had limited success in terms of the students' improving their reading, the project empowered Grace to take charge of the situation and actively seek out the instructional specialists whose services she needed to implement her intervention.

The "aha" for Grace through her action research was her discovery of the personal and social circumstances of her two young subjects. She learned that "about 28 percent of our school population is from public housing. Most of those students do not come to school with the background experiences and the parental support needed to be successful." This discovery, in turn, led her to become an advocate for children

and their parents who live in the nearby public housing. She also gave testimony at a local school board and helped save the job of the school-community liaison worker who cooperated with her in the action research project.

For Joan, action research made visible to her the connections that her Kindergartners were making for themselves. This convinced her that their varied activities in centers were real learning experiences upon which new learning could be constructed. This was important to her because she knew the following year she would be "looping" with the students to become their first grade teacher, something she had never done. After six months teaching first grade, Joan found she was employing some of the next steps identified in her research. Not only did this strengthen her teaching ability for first grade, but it also compelled her to find more effective ways for communicating with parents, as was the case for Grace.

Leaders among Peers. The participants' perceptions of themselves as leaders among their peers was a "mixed bag," at best. Mark and Joan, who viewed themselves as certainly being accomplished teachers, had mixed feelings about their ability to influence "how other teachers think about, plan for, and conduct their work with students" (Little,1988, p. 84).

Concerning his first attempt to conduct a staff development session, Mark wrote:

> When you have been given the responsibility to plan an in-service for your colleagues their expectations are high, and their tolerance for nonsense is low. If you are successful, you will be rewarded with a higher confidence level, and your credibility will be enhanced. If you are unsuccessful, your role as a leader will be diminished, and you can expect skepticism the next time you express a new idea.

Mark had served many times as a faculty representative on committees and believed he was respected by his peers. Yet, he was sure to avoid controversy in

such situations. He did , however, have a history of challenging his principal, also a male, on numerous issues of concern, especially those dealing with the quality of the curriculum and fairness in the workplace. Mark felt he had found some common ground with his principal by sharing with him what he had learned in graduate school.

Joan, on the other hand, had felt some degree of success as a leader among her peers. Like Mark, she was armed with a great deal of knowledge and expertise about teaching and learning, and she felt that on a subtle level, she had influenced other teachers' practice. Her latest experience as a teacher trainer for the school district engendered a new confidence and interest in teaching adults. Joan's enthusiasm for teacher leadership was linked to her relationship with her principal, whom she regarded as a role model and mentor. In her journal she wrote:

> I do get discouraged though, because even in my wonderful position at a new magnet school with a hand picked faculty--there are still many constraints to where theory and actual practice just don't walk the [same] side of the street. I start to wonder if real reform is possible. [My principal] keeps telling me to remember that the faculty isn't all in the same place when it comes to Constructivism, so we have to start small. I am not sure that I agree.

Of the three participants, Grace seemed to be the most assured of her position as a leader. Her relationship with her principal, a female, appeared to be one of mutual respect and support. Grace felt her principal was helpful because she actively encouraged teachers to participate in new opportunities for professional growth.

For Grace, what she had experienced and learned during the duration of this study seemed to have more visible outcomes for teacher leadership than did that of Mark and Joan. As a grade level team leader, she used her communication skills to plan effective meetings with her peers that got the work done and in shorter amounts of time than the team expected. By making student remediation a priority, she

included the remediation specialist in her team planning sessions. This not only made the remediation specialist feel more accepted as a team player but also enabled more effective strategies to be created to target the needs of children placed at-risk (Holmes, 1986).

Perhaps the most outstanding professional experience that Grace had was her teaching a graduate course for her school district. This experience offered her the opportunity to make connections between theory and practice through the act of "teaching teachers." Her journal reflections from that time suggested her new ability to make theoretical connections spontaneously as she engaged in discussions with her teacher-students. It has been reported that the ability of experienced practitioners to create new grounded theory is one of the major benefits of action research to the field of curriculum and teaching (Oja & Smulyan, 1989).

Principals' Perspectives

Interviews with each of the participants' building principals focused on the principals' interpretations of the term "lead teacher." Principals were also asked to distinguish between what they meant by a "good teacher" and a lead teacher.

In general, the researcher found that the principals focused on the same themes or concerns, as did their respective lead teachers. The themes of problem-solving (Mark), communication (Grace), and connecting theory to practice (Joan) were echoed by the principals when discussing the lead teacher from his or her school.

The principals agreed that good teachers exhibit excellent teaching practice in the classroom, resulting in student achievement. However, lead teachers have qualities in addition to those of good teachers. Lead teachers exhibit knowledge, skills, and attitudes that reach beyond the classroom and contribute to the total school program. Lead teachers have the ability to articulate educational theory in a manner that is understandable and acceptable to their peers. Not only are lead teachers

trusted and respected by other teachers, but they also develop circles of influence (i.e., networks) that facilitate school change at the level of experience.

And, according to these principals, what are the conditions necessary to transform good teachers into lead teachers? Good teachers are enabled to become lead teachers if they are nurtured and appreciated for their good teaching performance by their principals. Recent studies on supporting teacher leadership have pointed out how principals must "set the stage for teacher leadership and allow teachers to seize the opportunity when they recognize the need" (Kahrs, 1996, p.27). In addition, factors such as life stages, recognition from the school district, and graduate study also contribute to the development of lead teachers.

Implications

Although this study was limited by its sampling and reliance on self-report, it does suggest an interplay among the characteristics of lead teachers, their professional development, and the contexts in which they practice. The interplay of these variables, among others, have been stressed as tantamount for ensuring the quality of a competent teacher work force for the twenty-first century (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

Results of the study suggest that lead teachers (1) identify strongly with the role of teacher; (2) believe that change improves one's knowledge and teaching practice; (3) understand the connections between curriculum and assessment for increasing student achievement; and (4) gain convincing evidence for change by participating in action research.

Lead teachers exhibit an ability to make connections between theory and practice that sets them apart from other teachers. A rekindling of an earlier interest in theory and practice, however, may or may not play out as being influential upon the thinking and practice of other teachers in the workplace, as described by some

researchers (e.g., Little, 1988). Context variables, including (1) relationships with principals and other teachers, (2) opportunities for professional growth, and (3) involvement of the school district in school reform efforts have some bearing on the extent to which lead teachers can contribute to building a professional culture in schools. Personal factors, including age, gender, and family conditions, also seem to contribute to this interplay of variables for effecting change.

In sum, this study holds implications for (1) increasing the shared responsibility for teaching and learning between lead teachers and principals, (2) utilizing a professional development model that educates teachers as researchers, and (3) creating quasi-administrative positions in schools that require the knowledge and abilities held by lead teachers.

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